

# The Importance Of Language In Becoming A More Effective Manager

Mark Twain once said, “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter — it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” Words matter because communication is the lifeblood of any relationship- professional and personal. It has often been said that it is not what you say but how you say it. Rightly so. But the language, the very words you choose also matter because they are indicative of your attitude and mindset. Moreover, people respond differently to certain words.

So what words do we choose and how do we say them? Consider four suggestions that are useful whether you are a chief executive, team leader, or employee:

- Avoid saying “but” or “however” when you respond or give feedback. The simple reason is that a negative word like “but” negates everything that comes before it – no matter how positive. For example: consider changing “I agree with you but I think...” or “You have a point but I believe...” to “I agree with you. I also believe...” without interjecting the contradictory “but,” “however” or “although.”
- In “The Ideal Praise to Criticism Ratio” (Harvard Business Review), Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman submit that to motivate the team, the optimal ratio is five positive comments for every negative one. This is because the mind seizes on the negative comment and is most affected by it. Therefore senior managers would do well to follow the principle of the four Ps: Praise in Public and Punish in Private. That is, if one wishes to think in terms of punishment at all. So a simple “well done” or “I agree with that” followed by “maybe we can do this a bit differently next time”, and an explanation how, garners respect and lifts morale. It is not about giving false praise, but positive reinforcement and constructive feedback that stems from genuine care and support.
- “Changing important words helped change important behaviors,” says Michael Scrage in his blog [“Good Leaders Don’t Use Bad Words”](#) (Harvard Business Review June 13, 2013). Consider the impact of using too many “don’ts” in your instructions. For example, if someone were to say “Don’t think of a pink elephant,” what would you do? And if they went on to say “Don’t think of a pink elephant with purple stripes”? This is because the brain does not process negative language very well. So, instead of shouting to a child “Don’t run across the road” when you see an oncoming car, simply shout “Stop!” Similarly, instead of telling your staff what you don’t want them to do, it is more motivating and supportive to tell them what you would like them to do.
- Finally, when possible, use questions rather than statements when you want to make suggestions or give advice. The most effective coaches and mentors use this method. So, when peers or junior staff present a less than satisfactory report, for example, ask them if they could make certain changes; or what they think would be the outcome of making certain changes; or if they also felt these changes could improve the document. And if you wanted them to make any behavioral changes, ask if they felt it possible or agreed that this would help them and others work more effectively. This way, we give ownership of the action to the other person and empower them to bring about a positive change themselves. It is less stressful for you, too.

Ultimately, language is about communicating, building rapport, and bonding with others. The more effectively and empathetically you do this, the easier and more productive the work becomes. The bonus is the positive, supportive atmosphere in the workplace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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